See No Evil, Speak No Evil, Hear No Evil

*Politicized Potentials of the Intelligence Cycle*

Jeanie Smith
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MONKEY SEE, MONKEY DO

The intelligence cycle is widely agreed to consist of seven steps: planning and direction; intelligence collection; processing; analysis and production (building the deliverable intelligence product); dissemination of the product to policymakers; consumption of that product by policymakers; and feedback. The problem with demarcating feedback as a singular step occurring at the end of the intelligence cycle is that a gross underestimation of reality occurs, as the policymaker’s involvement throughout the intelligence cycle, and the internal and external pressures placed upon both analysts and policymakers throughout the intelligence cycle, are ignored, all of which can influence both parties’ interpretations of the intelligence at hand.

While the proverbial Three Wise Monkeys advise humanity to see no evil, hear no evil, and speak no evil, such advice serves as a warning of what to and what not to do in the quest for credible intelligence. Policymakers must not take the position of “see no evil” by turning a blind eye to the activities their requests may demand of intelligence collectors, attempting to avoid blame should any unsavory activities be publicized to the American public at a later date. Intelligence analysts must “speak no evil,” as they fight to ignore internal organizational pressures to conform to a status quo intelligence perspective, opting instead to consistently and honestly report their credible analyses, while also taking care to ignore their own internal biases. And finally, policymakers must, perhaps most importantly, not opt to “hear no evil,” choosing to ignore those intelligence analyses which do not agree with their political stances or the political stances of their party. Key to hearing no evil is the added challenge of understanding the difference between mysteries and secrets when it comes to intelligence, thereby accepting that sometimes there may be no intelligence answer on which a political platform may be based.

SEE NO EVIL

The first phase of the intelligence cycle involves determining what questions need to be answered, and what process of intelligence collection will be used to determine those answers. If a policymaker is interested, for example, in whether or not the Islamic Coalition Against Terrorism (the Coalition) will have an impact against the growing threat of ISIS in the Middle East, this first phase of the intelligence cycle will determine the steps needed to be taken to answer that intelligence question. The second phase of the intelligence cycle, the collection phase, is the phase during which that predetermined plan is put into action through specific collection means, whether that be through the use of human intelligence (HUMINT) collection to determine the various opinions and goals of each nation participating in the Coalition; through the use of technical intelligence (TECHINT) collection and taking satellite imagery of the Coalition’s meeting place to ensure purely diplomatic purposes are at hand; or through open-source collection efforts, sifting through local news reports of what the Coalition has or has not decided. The collection phase thus entails the physical actions of the intelligence community to collect the intelligence requested by policymakers.

Unfortunately, it is very possible for policymakers, who do not play a role in the collection of intelligence, to take a hands-off approach once he or she has explained to the intelligence community what intelligence is needed to assist in guiding policy decisions. While it very well should be the role of intelligence analysts to determine the best methods to collect the requested intelligence, the past has shown that policymakers making blanket requests for intelligence while turning a blind eye to the methods utilized is both naïve and arrogant. Naïve, because policymakers know very well what the American intelligence community is capable of,
and arrogant because time and again policymakers feign shock when callous collection methods are brought to light and offend the American public’s fragile sensibilities. One need look no further than the fight against communism from the 1950’s to the 1990’s to find a multitude of examples of policymakers making requests and subsequently chastising the intelligence community for its actions to fulfill those requests.

Operation Zapata in Cuba, for example, in April of 1961 showcased 1,400 Cuban Expeditionary Force (CEF) fighters landing at the Bay of Pigs in an attempt to overthrow then-dictator Fidel Castro and his communist regime.\(^2\) While such an operation appears unrelated to U.S. intelligence collection at first glance, Fidel Castro’s complete annihilation of the CEF over just two days led to the exposure of direct U.S. involvement—as the U.S. had trained the CEF as a means of supporting the overthrow of Castro, and had provided the CEF with B-26 bombers and landing crafts.\(^3\) The American public was outraged at the U.S. government’s involvement in a political coup, provoking the Taylor Commission to determine the cause of the operation’s failures. While the report did blame the CIA for not keeping the president completely informed of its actions, the majority of blame was found to fall upon the White House, the State Department, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff for giving “the impression to others of approving”\(^4\) the CIA’s actions, and for furthermore providing “top level direction…through ad hoc meetings of senior officials without consideration of operational plans in writing.”\(^5\)

These “impressions” of approval hold their foundation in National Security Directive 10/2, which was written by the Truman administration in 1948.\(^6\) In response to growing Soviet

\(^2\) Best, Richard. “Proposals for Intelligence Reorganization,” Ethics of Spying: A Reader for the Intelligence Professional (Vol. 2) Jan Goldman, ed. (Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2010), pg. 212.
\(^3\) Ibid.
\(^4\) Ibid., pg. 213.
\(^5\) Ibid.
control over Eastern Europe, and in response to communism gaining traction in Southeast Asia and Africa, President Truman determined that extensive covert psychological, political, and paramilitary operations were necessary to counter Soviet and communist expansion. This formal authorization of covert action gave the intelligence community carte blanche to take whatever actions they deemed necessary to counter the Soviet threat, while simultaneously giving policymakers the opportunity for a hands-off approach. To be clear, as far as giving the “impression” of approval goes, National Security Directives do not give impressions; they give explicit permissions or denials. The Taylor Commission thus serves as proof for just how politicized these first and second stages of the intelligence cycle can be, as policymakers turn a blind eye to protect their positions while knowing full well what the actions of intelligence collection could entail.

Similar hypocrisy was seen during the Church and Pike Committees of 1976, when both houses of Congress laid out proposals for heavy-handed restrictions to be placed on the CIA following the exposure of its morally questionable domestic and international covert action operations. Yet having given free rein to the CIA to perform whatever collection methods necessary to defend against communism, can Congress honestly be allowed to feel disgust and shock at the CIA’s actions? No. This concept of plausible deniability on the part of policymakers to protect their reputations is unconvincing at best, and willful ignorance at worst.

The U.S. intelligence community faces a similar situation today, as the previously suspended powers of the CIA to carry out assassinations (among other permissions) were reinstated for the purposes of eliminating terrorist threats immediately following the terrorist

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attacks of 9/11. Yet, as John Rizzo, former CIA lawyer, explained in an interview with “Frontline” in 2011, the feigned ignorance of policymakers, whether in the legislative or executive branches, is far from feigned. Rizzo explains:

“I had never in my experience been part of or ever seen a presidential authorization as far-reaching and as aggressive in scope. It was simply extraordinary…I don’t remember hearing anyone at the time—and the time, of course, was a day or two after 9/11—expressing any reservations about the scope of the activities being proposed.”

Some of the results of this blanket permission have already been brought to light through the exposure of such calamitous scandals as Abu Ghraib and the use of enhanced interrogation techniques by American intelligence and military personnel. Time will tell how the American public handles the increased permissions given to intelligence collectors and whether the public places its judgement of moral blasphemy upon the shoulders of intelligence agencies themselves, or upon the shoulders of the policymakers who opted to “see no evil.”

SPEAK NO EVIL

This discussion is not to say that policymakers are the only one’s capable of politicizing intelligence. While the processing third phase of the intelligence cycle is strictly translating or deciphering intelligence and does not present the opportunity for personal opinion, the production and analysis phase can abound with such opportunities. Analysts must pay careful attention to ensure their analyses remain objective, controlling their personal biases, and not

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9 Ibid.
allowing internal organizational and external political pressures to shape their analyses. After all, whatever their analyses dictate, policymakers will be accepting as unequivocal fact.

As Robert M. Clark explains, “Every American is entitled to his own opinion but not his own facts.”\textsuperscript{10} Every analyst has his or her own ethnocentric biases and loyalties\textsuperscript{11} which have been psychologically imbedded through personal experience. How one views the world, a specific group of people, or even a nation can be determined before ever setting foot within the walls of an intelligence agency. Yet when it comes to determining the facts and recognizing the patterns among collected intelligence, analysts must work to set aside those personal biases for the sake of producing credible intelligence—what some refer to as “the first commandment”\textsuperscript{12} of analysis.

Coupled with this idea of preventing personal biases from intervening in one’s analysis is the ego factor, which can blind an analyst to new intelligence that may refute his or her own previously produced intelligence products. Just as credible analysis is the first commandment of intelligence analysis, allowing one’s previous determinations to drive one’s analysis may be said to be the first sin of intelligence analysis. To counter such opportunities from occurring, competitive analysis is crucial to ensuring intelligence does not become politicized through a personal lens. Similarly, internal organizational pressures can push analysts to come to the same conclusions which other analysts currently, or which other analysts in the past, have arrived at, so as to project a tradition of cohesive accuracy on the part of the intelligence agency to policymakers—or the customers. Competitive analysis is the process of analysts presenting

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., pg. 4.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., pg. 328.
analyses which counter previously held positions. This does not mean that different interpretations of intelligence are always accurate, but it does present the opportunity for outliers to be heard in case those outliers have begun to create patterns previously unnoticed. Competitive analysis also serves to prevent “premature closing,” or making an early judgement on intelligence based off of previous analyses, creating a subconscious blind spot to new evidence. If analysts with differing perspectives on intelligence can present on their findings, it may trigger a breakthrough of such blind spots and, thus, a more critical interpretation of the intelligence at hand may be produced.

Finally, external pressures to “speak no evil” for the sake of making the policymaker happy have an enormous potential to politicize intelligence. It is a delicate balance an analyst must strike between keeping the attention of policymakers to ensure their analyses are heard and respected to better guide policy, and not tilting the analysis under a certain political light to ensure it is well received. Policymakers will not always be happy with analysts’ final determinations, but the fact must remain that analysts produce credible, unbiased, well-considered products.

When this perfect storm of biases and internal and external pressures does come into play, U.S. policy can be grossly misdirected—as occurred in the determination that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) in Iraq. In 2002 a National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) was requested by Congress to determine the scope and capabilities of Iraq’s WMD program. The NIE, which is an analysis produced by the entire intelligence community

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regarding a specific topic,\textsuperscript{15} determined that Iraq was in fact either pursuing or already in possession of nuclear weapons, biological weapons, chemical weapons, and unarmed aerial vehicles (UAVs) equipped to deliver such weapons.\textsuperscript{16} As it turned out, each of these determinations was wrong and launched the U.S. into a war in Iraq which is still embroiling U.S. troops today.

With the Iraq WMD NIE, the intelligence community was given a request by Congress which was very narrow in scope and clearly held bias. The intelligence community failed, in response to those pressures, to ask the right questions during its analysis, and the tight deadline request for the completion of the NIE led to premature closing, resting facts on an incompetent source codenamed Curveball, as opposed to on competitive analysis.\textsuperscript{17} Had analysts been able to evade the politicization apparent in this NIE request from the beginning, and, more critically, had the intelligence community questioned preconceived perceptions of whether or not Saddam Hussein had WMDs, the Iraq WMD NIE could have yielded a much different intelligence product. As the resulting WMD Commission (conducted in response to the fallacies of the Iraq WMD NIE) stated, “This was a major intelligence failure” based upon “a failure to make clear just how much of [the intelligence community’s] analysis was based on assumptions, rather than good evidence.”\textsuperscript{18}

HEAR NO EVIL

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., pg. 383.
Even if the Iraq WMD NIE had been assessed more critically and presented a completely different analysis, would Congress have accepted the intelligence community’s assessment? One of the greatest challenges to avoiding politicized intelligence occurs in the final few phases of the intelligence cycle—dissemination, consumption, and feedback—during which policymakers must decide what to do with the intelligence analyses they have been presented.

Similar to intelligence analysts, policymakers have internal and external pressures to contend with when making their decisions. Internally, policymakers must make their political party and subsequent party donors happy to ensure the cohesiveness and success of his or her party. Just as analysts may fall victim to groupthink and allowing the status quo opinion to affect their analytical interpretations, so too may policymakers fall prey to groupthink within his or her party and the status quo donors expect. Externally, however, the pressures experienced by analysts as compared to policymakers differ. While external pressures for analysts are exceedingly strong, analyst’s jobs do not solely depend on the opinions of those external factors. Policymakers, on the other hand, have one main job: to get reelected.

Should policymakers take a stance on a policy issue which runs counter to the opinions of their party and voter base, policymakers risk national media chastisement and jeopardize their chances of being reelected. Furthermore, because the American public holds a short attention span, policymakers have a tendency to announce their opinions on controversial security issues before the intelligence community has fully evaluated the intelligence surrounding those issues. This relationship between policymakers and external political pressures leads to what Joshua Rovner refers to as policy oversell. As Rovner explains, “When publicly committed leaders face
organized domestic opposition, they have strong incentives to force intelligence to deliver conclusions that justify their position.”19

Returning to the Iraq WMD NIE discussed earlier, one of the greatest issues with that NIE rested within the frame of which it was requested, making it very clear to the intelligence community that Congress and the president were looking for the results to fall on the side of Saddam Hussein possessing WMDs. When the WMD Commission showed that the NIE had been wrong, policymakers who had publicly argued for military intervention in Iraq were crucified in the media, with voter bases calling into question those policymakers’ ability to lead. Political fallout from the Iraq WMD NIE is still felt today, as can be seen in presidential debates which continue to feature the question of whether or not a candidate voted to invade Iraq or not. While sympathy for policymakers placed under such time constraints and being directly responsible to voter bases is understandable and even necessary, policymakers must fight against such unreasonable constraints to ensure intelligence is given the time to be appropriately weighed; only then can the guidance policymakers are to glean from intelligence analyses be fully unbiased and accepted.

It is equally important to the concept of “hear no evil” that analysts make it clear to policymakers when certain requests for intelligence simply cannot be fulfilled, establishing the clear difference between mysteries, which do not have answers, and secrets, whose mysteries can be resolved through intelligence collection and analysis.20 Secrets, such as Iran’s nuclear plans or a terrorist group’s training program, can be learned through long-term, disciplined intelligence collection. However, the ability to predict such things as a coup is a mystery, as not even the

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military personnel or government leadership is able to predict such actions within their own country. As stated by one senior intelligence official, “Intelligence does not do fortune-telling.”\textsuperscript{21} Policymakers would thus do well to not speak publicly of their vehement stances on issues whose answers realistically cannot be known; such actions are inevitably followed by undue politically biased pressure on the intelligence community to find intelligence which supports their stance.

\textbf{TAKE IT FROM THE MONKEY’S MOUTH}

It is true that the road through the intelligence cycle is fraught with potential politicization potholes, but what is more true is that each driver of the intelligence cycle, from the policymaker, to the intelligence analyst, to the intelligence manager, is responsible for avoiding such potholes. During the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence’s hearing for the confirmation of Robert Gates as director of the CIA in 1991, multiple intelligence analysts were questioned regarding the standard of conduct necessary to produce credible intelligence products. The habits of the older generation of CIA officers were referenced by many, explaining that said generation had stressed,

“...the need for integrity of judgement and action, a generation of officers raised on the need to tell it like it is, of going where the evidence takes one and then candidly so telling senior policymakers, whether they find such judgments congenial or not—the aim being to enlighten them about the true shape of the world, not to please them or cater to their preconceptions.”\textsuperscript{22}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., pg. 300.\
\textsuperscript{22} Clark, Robert M. \textit{Intelligence Analysis: A Target-Centric Approach} (5\textsuperscript{th} Ed.) (Los Angeles, CA: CQ Press, 2016), pp. 305-306.}
In navigating the road of the intelligence cycle, each driver must bear in mind that the reason for their journey is to determine “the true shape of the world,” not permitting internal and external pressures to matter so much as to hinder the progress of effective policy. Policymakers must understand what they are asking of intelligence collections officers when making requests to fill intelligence gaps, intelligence analysts must set aside personal biases and submit to competitive analysis exercises, and policymakers must fully accept the consequences of their hubris in speaking publicly on controversial intelligence issues which credible intelligence may later refute. The recurring theme here in refusing to “see no evil,” fighting to “speak no evil,” and avoiding the impulse to “hear no evil,” is personal pride. Policymakers and intelligence professionals alike must fight against their pride every day for the sake of avoiding politicized intelligence, committing instead to construct American policy on sound, unbiased, and unpolicitized intelligence.
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